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## Open by Degrees: A Case of Flexibility or Personalization?

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#### How to cite:

Cooke, Helen; Lane, Andrew and Taylor, Peter (2018). Open by Degrees: A Case of Flexibility or Personalization? In: Stevenson, Carolyn ed. Enhancing Education Through Open Degree Programs and Prior Learning Assessment. IGI Global, pp. 128–148.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-5255-0.ch008>

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# Enhancing Education Through Open Degree Programs and Prior Learning Assessment

Carolyn N. Stevenson  
*Kaplan University, USA*

A volume in the Advances in Educational  
Technologies and Instructional Design (AETID)  
Book Series



Published in the United States of America by

IGI Global  
Information Science Reference (an imprint of IGI Global)  
701 E. Chocolate Avenue  
Hershey PA, USA 17033  
Tel: 717-533-8845  
Fax: 717-533-8661  
E-mail: [cust@igi-global.com](mailto:cust@igi-global.com)  
Web site: <http://www.igi-global.com>

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stevenson, Carolyn N., 1968-

Title: Enhancing education through open degree programs and prior learning assessment / Carolyn N. Stevenson, editor.

Description: Hershey, PA : Information Science Reference, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017037440 | ISBN 9781522552550 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781522552567 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Open learning--Administration. | Internet in higher education--Administration. | Prior learning--Evaluation.

Classification: LCC LC5800 .E65 2018 | DDC 374/.4--dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017037440>

This book is published in the IGI Global book series Advances in Educational Technologies and Instructional Design (AE-TID) (ISSN: 2326-8905; eISSN: 2326-8913)

British Cataloguing in Publication Data

A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book is available from the British Library.

All work contributed to this book is new, previously-unpublished material. The views expressed in this book are those of the authors, but not necessarily of the publisher.

For electronic access to this publication, please contact: [eresources@igi-global.com](mailto:eresources@igi-global.com).

## Chapter 8

# Open by Degrees: A Case of Flexibility or Personalization?

**Helen Cooke**

*The Open University, UK*

**Andy Lane**

*The Open University, UK*

**Peter Taylor**

*The Open University, UK*

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter focuses on the history, development, and perceived value of The Open University UK's BA/BSc (Hons) Open degree (hereafter referred to as "OUUK Open degree") over the past half-century in the context of changing external pressures and addressing debates around the coherence and acceptance of such a personalized program of study. It touches on the changing views of "openness" over time, from the origins of The Open University's "open entry" policy, through to ideas around flexibility of study, open education, and personalized learning. The chapter concludes with recommendations for other higher education institutions wishing to introduce a multidisciplinary open degree into their portfolio of curriculum.*

### INTRODUCTION

Almost all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offer subject-specific degrees whereby students have to follow a more or less prescribed set of courses or modules, with this internal prescription often influenced by external quality frameworks, such as subject benchmark statements set out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the United Kingdom (UK)<sup>1</sup>. Open degrees provide a valued alternative to subject-specific degrees by offering students the opportunity to study a flexible, personalized degree, where they can choose the modules they wish to study, constrained only by the need to study a required number of credits at each level or stage of study<sup>2</sup>. This approach provides students with access to a wide variety of subjects that match and build on their existing skills and knowledge

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5255-0.ch008

## Open by Degrees

to develop a personalized curriculum that reinforces their existing experience to meet their vocational needs and personal interests.

Unlike most other universities in the UK, The Open University started with a single BA Open degree. Only later was a BSc option added to the Open degree and, subsequently, specific, named degrees (see Figure 1). The Open University UK (OUUK) was established as the UK's first solely distance teaching university in 1969 and the first students were enrolled in January 1971.

The University's mission is to be "open to people, places, methods and ideas". The OUUK therefore has an open entry policy to students with no previous educational achievement requirements. It is "open to places" in that anybody in the UK, Europe and more recently globally can study with the University. It is "open to methods" in that it started life as a correspondence university based on written texts backed up by radio and television broadcasting and has developed into one of the most internationally acclaimed e-universities, where all teaching, learning and personal interactions can be achieved online (Weinbren, 2014). At the time the OUUK was founded, only about 10 percent of the UK population went to university and widening participation was very much part of the government's agenda. The creation of the OUUK's awards was strongly influenced by the personal experiences of the University's first Vice-Chancellor, based on the interdisciplinary, four-year degrees that were common in Scotland at that time. This was also the time when the UK was looking to train more scientists and technologists and a recommendation was made to the UK government in the Swann Report that:

*To prepare for and assist in this change there should be a detailed study of current curricula in science, engineering and technology in University education and of the balance between specialized and more*

Figure 1. Event to celebrate The Open University gaining a Royal Charter in 1969  
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*general studies in relation to career needs... (Committee on Manpower Resources for Science and Technology (1968), cited in The Open University Planning Committee (1969))*

In response to these developments, The Open University Planning Committee (1969) also proposed the idea of “a broader type of education than that provided by a usual degree and an interdisciplinary one”:

*The degree of the Open University should, we considered, be a “general degree” in the sense that it would embrace studies over a range of subjects rather than be confined to a single narrow speciality. In our view the Open University should not set out to compete with the established universities which can so much more efficiently provide “special” degrees for students who can spend three years of full-time study in the laboratories and libraries of their specialist schools. Rather should the Open University degree be complementary, providing for the part-time student a broadly based higher education, for which the teaching techniques available to the Open University are particularly suited. Furthermore we were aware of the great need and demand in the country, emphasised in the Swann Report, for an extension of facilities for such general degrees. (The Open University Planning Committee, 1969)*

To this day, the OUUK Open degree continues to allow students to construct a personalized degree (or certificate or diploma of higher education) from a range of undergraduate modules across all faculties in the University, enabling them to choose a flexible study path which focuses on personal interests and/or career-related skills in a multidisciplinary way. Students studying the OUUK Open degree can choose which subjects to combine, together with the order in which they study their chosen modules within a specific stage of study.

This chapter explores how much “flexibility” (Burge et al, 2011), or how many ‘degrees of freedom’, OUUK Open degree students have with regard to their choice of subject content, study motivations, how they choose to learn and how this approach to learning has changed over time. It also addresses the value of such degrees to enhancing the confidence and employability of the students:

*We need to develop learners who are skilled at personalising their learning, as the changing nature of knowledge, means this is a fundamental skill for today’s workforce. (Olsen, 2011)*

All of the benefits and challenges of OUUK Open degree study described in this chapter are set in the context of external drivers. Some drivers have changed very little, for example, from the very beginning, The Open University has operated an institutional credit transfer system, aligned to the national Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), where a student’s previously earned higher education credit is mapped onto Open University modules to determine how much credit is valid for them to transfer into a particular qualification. Since the OUUK Open degree allows students to study modules from almost all areas of the University’s curriculum, it allows the greatest flexibility in the recognition of credit obtained at other institutions, whether in the UK, Europe or even beyond. This is particularly true of students who may have started studying at a conventional University but found the subject chosen did not meet their expectations. They therefore welcome the opportunity to study an OUUK Open degree, as they can focus on a different subject and yet still have their initial study recognized as ‘general exemption’, meaning that they have been exempted from studying the specified amount of credit at the given academic level, rather than being exempted from specific OUUK module(s) (known as ‘module exemption’).

In contrast, one of the biggest trends in higher education over the past 20 years has been the desire for most degrees to better serve the employment prospects of students and the economic well-being of the countries they study in. This is seen mostly in the expansion of the number and type of professional bodies that help define professional standards and practices and the rise of vocational qualifications that ‘map’ onto new job roles or employment sectors. These professional bodies in turn influence the shape and nature of degrees and, in the UK at least, the advent of degrees developed with, or largely specified by, employers and employers’ organizations (such as degree apprenticeships<sup>3</sup>). Such trends would appear to militate against open degrees where students are allowed to choose their own pathway. However, evidence supports the view that employers value open degree graduates as much as subject-specific degree graduates, as together they can decide the best combination of modules for the student in relation to their employment and therefore enable the student to tailor their own personalized degree.

## BACKGROUND

### The Origin and Nature of the OUUK Open Degree

As discussed earlier, the OUUK was granted its Royal Charter in 1969 and was established by the UK government to provide a “second chance” to adults who, for whatever reason, were unable to attend a “traditional’ university” (Weinbren, 2014) (Figure 1). As the first ever “Open” university (Lane, 2015) it had many unique characteristics, including open entry (no prior qualifications needed), operating through distance learning and offering a single degree qualification – the OUUK Open degree, which was available with and without honours. In March 2004, the UK Credit Framework was introduced and, as a result, Open University honours degrees were reduced from the equivalent of 480 credits to 360 credits (180 ECTS-credits) with a 300-credit requirement for the degree without honours (Figure 2).

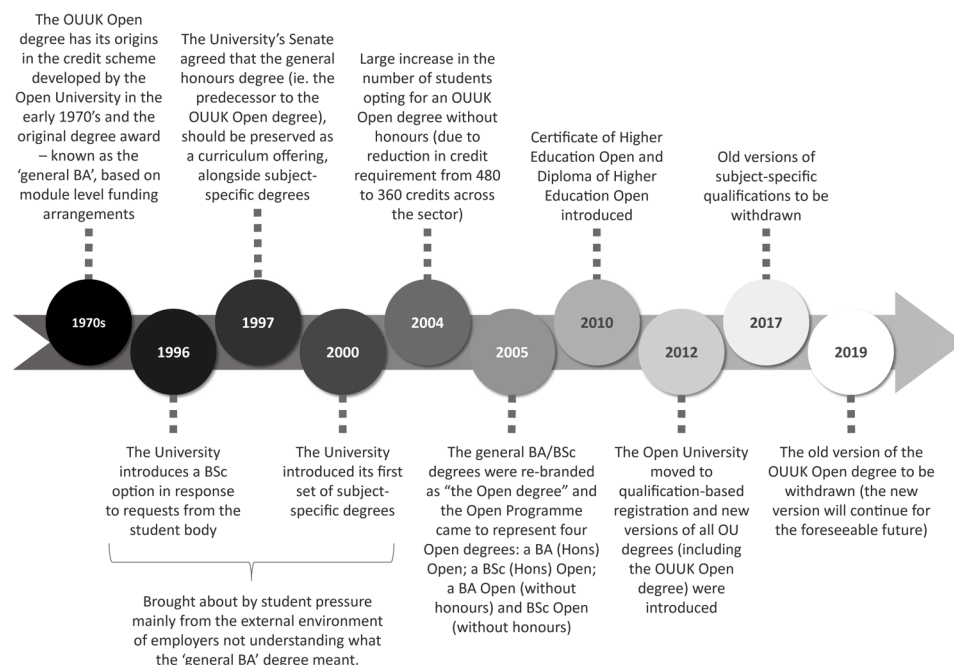
The OUUK Open degree is the University’s largest degree in terms of student numbers and module choice, and has been available for almost 50 years. At present, students studying an OUUK Open degree account for almost 20 percent of all OUUK students (almost 25 percent in some subject areas), and over 236,000 alumni have graduated with an OUUK Open degree since 1971. As such, the OUUK Open degree has played a significant role in the history of The Open University and the delivery of its mission to be “open to people, places, methods and ideas”<sup>4</sup>, by offering a large number of students a qualification which they can tailor to their own vocational and personal requirements through certain aspects of flexibility.

Until 2000, the OUUK Open degree was the only qualification that The Open University offered. In an account of his time as the University’s first Vice-Chancellor during the 1970s, Walter Perry (Figure 3) attempted to capture the aims behind the ‘general BA’ (as the OUUK Open degree was originally known) by stating that:

*The usual criticism...is that a student who has a free choice of courses that [s]he can take credit for is liable to end up with what has been called ‘a miscellaneous rag-bag of credits’ – a second rate degree with no internal coherence. Such people argue strongly that teachers must determine the pattern of studies that is most suited to the individual student and that direction of this kind is of the essence of education. Opponents of this view, on the other hand, argue equally strongly that a student is the best judge of what [s]he wishes to learn and that [s]he should be given the maximum freedom of choice consistent*

Figure 2. History of the OUUK Open degree

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with a coherent overall pattern. They hold that this is doubly true when one is dealing with adults who, after years of experience of life, ought to be in a better position to judge what precise studies they wish to undertake... We therefore determined to put an absolute minimum of constraint upon the individual student in his[her] choice of course.(Perry, 1976, p.61)

Perry also described how the earliest cohort of Open University students responded to this modular system and explained the reasoning behind an initial single award of the general BA by saying that:

*In practice it is remarkable how conservative our student body has been and how coherent are the patterns of study that have been chosen. It is extremely uncommon for a student to take a set of credits which any academic could call a miscellaneous rag-bag. One can in fact trust adult students not to abuse their freedom of choice.*

*It was partly for this reason, too, that we determined to offer only one undergraduate degree. There was a good deal of feeling that we should offer several...Yet to allow students to choose their credits freely from more than one Faculty would cause considerable problems if each Faculty were to offer a different degree...Soon flexibility would be lost and students would more and more tend to fall in predetermined patterns of study. For this reason we decided to offer only a BA degree. We perhaps made a virtue of necessity by arguing that the same decision had been taken by both Oxford and Cambridge and was therefore hallowed by tradition. (Perry, 1976, p.61)*



*Figure 3. Vice Chancellor Walter Perry (shown left) and Margaret Thatcher looking at Open University study materials, January 1973*

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The account above not only highlights The Open University's original aims to provide a flexible choice of curriculum leading to the award of a degree; it also highlights the difference between conventional students, who in many ways have limited life experience and where guidance through their degrees is important, and adult learners, who already have a range of skills and knowledge and where their choice of modules (and, more recently, qualifications) reinforces their personal interests and/or career aspirations.

### **Characteristics and Motivations of OUUK Open Degree Students**

At the time of writing, The Open University remains the UK's largest engine of social mobility, supporting just over half of the UK's part-time students who do not have the usual university entrance requirements, and over one-third of all UK part-time students with disabilities. The majority are also classified as being mature students; classified as being aged 25 or over when starting their studies and predominantly in work (see Table 1). However, as the University is "open" to all students, it has no prerequisite study requirements before students start studying towards one of its undergraduate qualifications, with the exception of some degrees recognized by professional bodies that have strict entry requirements. The OUUK Open degree therefore focuses on overall student credit and award outcomes, rather than student input standards. The diversity of the OUUK Open degree student body broadly reflects that of the University as a whole, but with slightly higher proportions of students with a disability and students with below-standard university entry qualifications.

Irrespective of whether students are studying a single subject or a range of different disciplines, all students are required to start their study with a key introductory OUUK level 1 module to prepare them for higher level distance learning<sup>5</sup>. Further specific study skills development is available for all OUUK

Table 1. Facts and figures on Open University students<sup>6</sup>, 2015/16

Headline	Figure
Total number of directly registered students in 2015/16	132,502
OU's proportion of part-time undergraduates taught, in UK sector	38%
Percentage of directly registered OU students already in work	76%
OU undergraduates who had no previous higher education qualifications on entry	76%
OU UK undergraduates who live in the 25 percent most deprived areas	23%
New OU undergraduates aged under 25	31%
Students with declared disabilities	17%
Credit transfer awards for prior study	5%

Open degree students, both at the beginning of their study and throughout their study journey. These resources are available online and, in addition to covering detailed skills such as revision and exam preparation, also provide support for specific groups of students, such as those with a disability.

Due to the diversity of students in terms of previous educational background, personal circumstances and the almost infinite combinations of module choices that are unique to each individual student, OUUK Open degree students cannot be stereotyped in any way, as their study decisions may be a result of wide-ranging personal and/or professional interests. This provides The Open University with a range of challenges around accommodating the needs of all OUUK Open degree students, ranging from the extremes of 'leisure learners' (those students studying purely for pleasure) to vocational learners, who are studying purely for career-related reasons. However, since The Open University does not have the timetabling constraints common to traditional campus-based universities when offering open, joint or combined degrees, the OUUK Open degree is able to offer students a much more flexible offer in terms of the modules that they can choose to study and, to some degree, the order they can study them in.

Despite the introduction of subject-specific 'named' degrees in 2000, a greater number of Open University students still graduate each year with an OUUK Open degree compared to popular subject-focused degrees in disciplines such as psychology, humanities and social sciences. The tension between strictly managed subject-focused degrees and the flexibility of the OUUK Open degree has surfaced many times, however there is a strong commitment to maintaining the OUUK Open degree and, in many ways, to expand its offering to provide further opportunities for students to create their own bespoke modules and qualifications, as described later in the chapter.

As a result, the OUUK Open degree continues to cater to a broad range of students, including:

- Students who wish to combine a set of subjects not catered for by The Open University's subject-focused degrees.
- Students who want freedom from having to take some of the compulsory modules associated with existing subject-focused degrees.
- Students who started off with the intention of a subject-focused degree but in the course of their studies have decided they want more flexibility in their studies or wish to change their subject focus.
- Students who want to start with a range of subjects to see which ones they enjoy and wish to focus on at a higher level.

In 2012, the university funding system for students in England was changed from government grants to student loans, which has resulted in new students in England having to pay higher fees to study. Student loans are now only available in England for those students who wish to study towards a qualification and different funding arrangements altogether are in place for students in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This change to funding in England has led to a reduction in the number of ‘leisure learners’ who can no longer afford to study individual modules, and an increase in the proportion of students who are studying for vocational reasons. In response to this funding change in 2012, The Open University moved from a module-focused provider to a qualification-focused provider, as shown in Figure 2, and a new version of all degrees, including the OUUK Open degree was created. Figure 2 also shows that old versions of subject-specific degrees will be withdrawn in 2017, however, the old version of the OUUK Open degree will not be withdrawn until 2019, providing a safety net for those students who cannot complete their subject-specific degree before the qualification is withdrawn.

So, why do so many students choose to study in such a multidisciplinary way? Research carried out with OUUK Open degree graduates in 2015 showed that students were motivated to study for their OUUK Open degree for both personal interest and development in different disciplines, as well as to support career development. Some graduates also noted the value that they, and their employer, had placed on being able to choose multidisciplinary modules which specifically supported their professional work portfolio. For example, one of the graduates interviewed already had a nursing qualification before beginning her OUUK Open degree and wanted to gain a degree qualification, as well as develop her subject-specific knowledge and skill set to support a career change and application for health visitor training. The graduate was interested in a range of different modules across different faculties, including health, science and education, and wanted to select specific modules which would support her professional development, which prevented her from following a subject-focused degree pathway.

On the other hand, some OUUK Open degree graduates described a more organic approach to their studies, valuing the opportunity to make ‘adult’ decisions about what they choose to study. In all cases, the OUUK Open degree graduates interviewed commented on the benefits of having a high level of autonomy and self-efficacy in both choosing their module pathways and managing any subsequent challenges as a result of transitions between subjects and/or stages of study.

## **CHALLENGES IN TEACHING AND SUPPORTING STUDENTS**

### **Skills Development**

Whilst the study of a single-subject degree establishes a student’s ability to study one subject in depth, institutional evidence suggests that almost half of OUUK Open degree students study two, three, or even more subjects, which demonstrates flexibility and the skills development across more than one subject. In particular, multidisciplinary study enables students to apply skills and discourse developed in one subject area to another, which is not available to those students who study within a single subject.

One area where multidisciplinary, open degree students need specific support is the development of generic employability skills. Within subject-specific degrees, employability skills are developed in a coherent fashion by integrating them within the constituent modules, which is particularly the case with compulsory modules. However, multidisciplinary students will study an unpredictable combination of modules, and individual students will have overlaps and gaps in the development of their employability

skills. To resolve this, OUUK Open degree students are encouraged to undertake a skills audit at the start of their qualification and after the completion of each stage of study. As a result, the student can gather together the skills they have developed through their module study – as well as through work or extracurricular activities – and identify what skills gaps they need to fill in order to progress to the next stage. Multidisciplinary students therefore need to be provided with resources to be able to address their skills that require further development, outside the context of the module structure. There are a wide range of extracts from most modules available for free study on the OUUK's OpenLearn platform (<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/>) to address any skills gaps, as well as providing an opportunity for students to practice their study techniques and make informed choices about what subject(s) to study, both before and during their OUUK Open degree.

The Open University also has a number of more formal routes into study available, in order to help such a diverse body of mainly mature students make the transition into academic undergraduate study and choose what subjects to study. This includes three distance learning Access modules, which have been specifically developed for students with no experience of academic study and cover the following subjects:

- Arts and languages
- People, work and society
- Science, technology and maths

In designing a subject-specific degree, teaching staff are responsible for creating a well-defined learning experience that is coherent and makes sense to the student. In contrast, a lot more responsibility is placed on an OUUK Open degree student who, as an adult learner, needs to make sense of the skills and knowledge they develop across the whole curriculum and to use their previous experience to make intellectual connections between subjects and synthesize these skills and knowledge into a graduate experience. Whilst it is up to the student to make those connections and understand the difference between studying more than one subject and focusing on just one main discipline. They are also helped by personalized feedback from Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs), which give detailed help to prepare students for answering future assignments.

The requirement to pass OUUK level 3 modules ensures the student achieves an appropriate range of learning outcomes, including the graduate requirements in the QAA frameworks described earlier in the chapter (as opposed to subject-specific requirements). Although it can be argued that the skills and knowledge achieved are more coherent in a subject-specific degree, OUUK Open degree students show greater capabilities by demonstrating the ability to study at an advanced level in more than one subject. This needs to be considered by the student when they choose to study an open, flexible degree, since the modules that a student will study during the latter stages of their degree cannot be predicted. The advantage of this, of course, is that OUUK Open degree students benefit from being able to prove themselves as more rounded scholars. In 2015, 43 OUUK Open degree students took part in a consultation exercise around the advantages and disadvantages of studying multi-subject degrees and themselves responded with phrases such as “academic excellence”, “open minded”, “versatile” and “disciplined”, when asked what skills studying more than one subject demonstrates.

*I really enjoyed doing a multidisciplinary degree and it was very useful in my career [teacher in inner London] - it is very helpful to be able to say 'I have done that subject at degree level' about a number of subject areas. (Anonymous, personal communication, 16 September, 2015)*

## **Building a Community of Multidisciplinary Learners**

In a world where students are able to choose their own pathway through a qualification, it is crucial to offer a space between their module websites where they can connect with other students and reflect on their qualification aims. Helping multidisciplinary students navigate through such a wide and complex range of choices at any institution clearly requires appropriate, tailored and timely advice and guidance. At traditional face-to-face universities, subject-specific degree students value the fact that they usually have a physical, geographical campus to meet fellow students and staff. This is not possible for OUUK students, other than infrequent opportunities to meet at locally based tutorials and summer schools. Students at face-to-face universities are also defined in 'year' cohorts, and even where students on any one module are taking different subject-specific degrees, those degrees are closely related. With OUUK students, there is little sense of cohorts, even on subject-specific degrees, due to the large student body and the fact that these, largely part-time, students may be studying at different intensities due to other commitments. This is compounded even further for the OUUK Open degree due to the large number of students studying this particular degree. However, this is not entirely uncommon for multidisciplinary students across the UK higher education sector. One of the complaints of combined honours students at such institutions is that they don't feel welcomed in either of the subject/department buildings within which they are studying and are merely regarded as 'visitors'. In some cases, such as Newcastle University in the UK, institutions have developed 'hubs' for combined honours students; an infrastructure where students studying more than one subject can come together in a community where they can build a sense of identity, belonging and affiliation. This also creates a space to discuss any challenges with staff and take collective action to resolve them.

However, there are additional challenges associated with developing and supporting a virtual community of multidisciplinary students studying at a distance learning institution, as well as studying outside of the usual structure of a specified series of modules with a subject focus. This is especially true in the case of the OUUK Open degree – a community comprising over 20,000 students, all from different backgrounds, with varied levels of digital literacy and with very different subject, study and career motivations – where students rarely have the opportunity to meet in a face-to-face environment. The use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) therefore has a particularly important role to play in helping OUUK Open degree students navigate and plan their module choices, as well as to reflect on the study and employability skills acquired across a range of different subject areas, and access resources provided by central departments such as the careers service and students association.

For multidisciplinary students studying at a distance, online resources are often aimed at supporting students studying a subject-specific degree and there is often only limited support for students studying across different subjects. To address this, OUUK Open degree students are provided with a specific online environment where the challenges relating to multidisciplinary study can be highlighted and where they can meet other OUUK Open degree students on online forums, to provide each other with peer support. Although there is still a risk of OUUK Open degree students becoming 'intellectually isolated' from their peers as a result of studying at a distance, the authors would argue that encouraging students with different interests and different subject choices to engage with each other provides an opportunity for

them to support and actually enrich each other's study, in a way that is not possible amongst a cohort of students all studying exactly the same pathway of modules through a qualification.

However, institutional research carried out at The Open University has shown that student expectations of their online environment are now higher than ever before, as advanced digital literacy skills bring a new market-based experience of what an engaging, easy-to-navigate and purposeful virtual learning environment should look like. Similarly, there are also increasing institutional expectations around providing qualification-centric information and community hubs to help universities retain students and encourage them to progress and complete their qualifications.

## **University Funding Models Influencing Curriculum Design**

One of the other drivers that often confounds the development of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary curriculum is the funding model used at most universities, where income tends to be primarily focused on the qualifications they study and the academic units that teach those subjects. There is, therefore, little incentive for curriculum teams to work together across different departments to develop new modules or joint qualifications, as there is often a perception that staff are contributing to the income of another department. As a result, the education of such students is often seen as non-core activity and subject-focused academic departments tend to prioritize the needs of their own subject-specific students, often to the detriment of the multidisciplinary, open degree learner. These two issues are partially resolved within the OUUK Open degree model, as funding follows module study, and therefore departments are rewarded for the modules that both subject-specific and multidisciplinary students study in terms of greater income and increased student number. The history and size of the multidisciplinary student body is such that all curriculum teams are encouraged to consider the needs of OUUK Open degree students when designing their modules. However, this is not always adhered to in practice, and a greater focus on the needs of single-subject students, as opposed to multidisciplinary learners, in module design often persists, particularly beyond the broader, more interdisciplinary introductory OUUK level 1 modules.

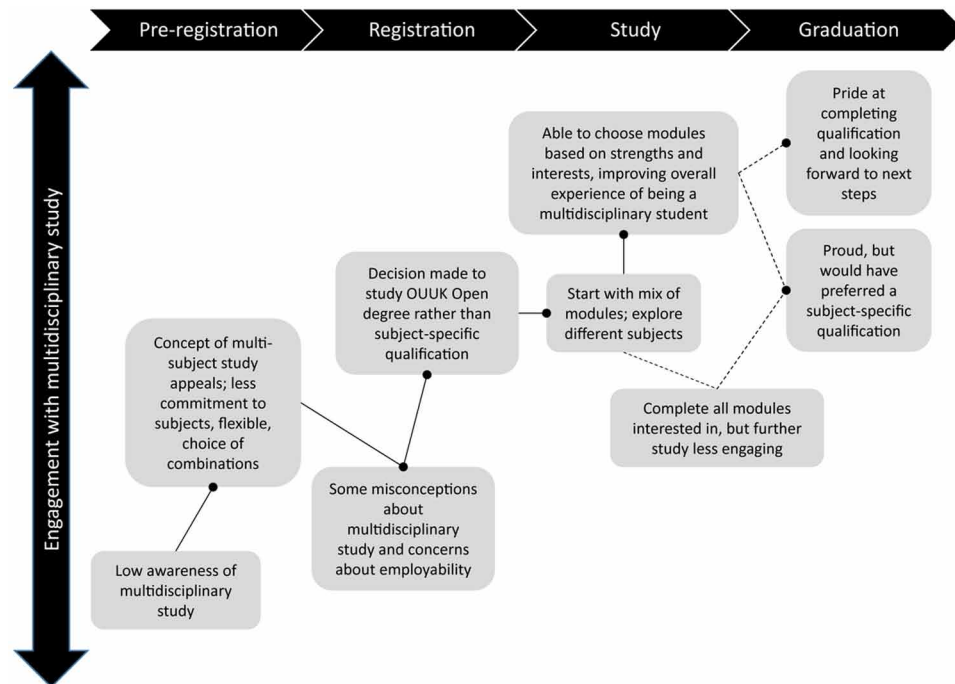
## **CHALLENGES FOR THE STUDENTS**

Of course, it is not only the institution delivering the curriculum that faces challenges relating to multidisciplinary study. Despite the many benefits, multidisciplinary students themselves are also faced with a range of challenges relating to both deciding whether to study across different subject boundaries, as well as actually studying across them. This is particularly an issue when transitioning between different subjects and different levels. The challenges in crossing these boundaries are considered to be especially problematic when the transitions occur towards the latter stages of an OUUK Open degree student's journey. However, it is also during these latter stages that students start to engage and identify more with being an OUUK Open degree student (see Figure 4).

## **Module and Subject Choice**

OUUK Open degree student satisfaction results are generally in line with students on subject-specific qualifications, but feedback consistently suggests that a greater emphasis is required on providing better information, advice and guidance to OUUK Open degree students around making informed study choices.

Figure 4. OUUK Open degree student journey and engagement  
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This suggests that, although they value the opportunity to study a wide range of different subjects, they can often feel overwhelmed by the amount of choice available.

An analysis of student choice within the OUUK Open degree suggests there are no common pathways or combinations of modules, leading to a plethora of individual, personalized curricula. Therefore, it is impossible for The Open University to provide each student with detailed guidance relating to the similarities and differences of the specific combination of subjects they have studied, or wish to study. Generic advice on what it means to be a multidisciplinary learner can be provided, along with strategies for coping with study in more than one subject, however, this still means that the onus is on the student to take responsibility for developing connections between the subjects they study. Rather than having a carefully guided pathway through a subject-specific degree with a small number of module options, each tailored to meet the needs of the core curriculum, multidisciplinary students have to navigate their own way through these different subject-specific practices and conventions, many of which have evolved to simply create an aura of subject expertise, therefore hindering a multidisciplinary student's learning.

In order to address this challenge and help students navigate the wide range of modules available, OUUK Open degree students are provided with a range of optional study routes in particular subject areas, which involve 60 credits of suggested modules at each stage of the degree (effectively resulting in a 180-credit 'half degree'). These study routes are developed by the relevant subject area and therefore suggest modules that have been designed to feed into each other and therefore provide the most sensible route through a particular subject. Having studied these advisory routes, students are in a better position to explain their OUUK Open degree to potential employers and discuss which subjects they have chosen to specialize in, and why.

## Coping With Depth of Knowledge and Understanding

The Open University has a large amount of statistical data on student performance and satisfaction ratings of OUUK Open degree students, compared with those on subject-specific degrees. An evaluation of this data demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of multidisciplinary study, both to the student and to the University.

Although the benefits of multidisciplinary study include a wider *breadth* of knowledge and understanding than students on subject-specific degrees, that breadth can often come at the expense of *depth* in a particular subject area. Overall, there are no consistent patterns to suggest that OUUK Open degree students perform better or worse on the same modules than students on subject-specific qualifications in terms of pass rates, which are monitored on an annual basis. However, not only do module pass rates appear to vary slightly between students on different qualifications taking the same modules, some marked differences have also been observed in terms of students choosing to start the same module at two different points in the academic year (i.e. in February and October), which further complicates analysis and interpretation of the data.

Nevertheless, there are differences in level of achievement between multidisciplinary students and subject-specific students on the module as shown by their grade distributions. Although there is very little difference between the grade distributions for students on multidisciplinary versus subject-specific degrees at OUUK level 1, we have observed that OUUK Open degree students achieve slightly lower grades at OUUK level 2 than students on subject-specific degrees, and this is further compounded at OUUK level 3. This difference may be small, but it is reflected in the distribution of the overall degree classification, where OUUK level 3 study is weighted higher than that at OUUK level 2. However, this pattern of distribution is often observed across the UK higher education sector for students on multidisciplinary degrees, and reflects the fact that the multidisciplinary learner does not always have the depth of study to rely on when undertaking higher level study.

## Dealing With Multiple Discourses and Language

One of the largest hurdles for multidisciplinary students is coping with the specific discourse used within different subjects, especially when they are in very different discipline areas. As this discourse reflects the way that knowledge is built within a particular subject – and the specific language that is used – it is up to the student to develop an understanding of this early on in their studies. For multidisciplinary students, this can often become more challenging as the complexity of the discourse develops through higher levels of study, as they will not have as complete an understanding of an individual subject's discourse as a student studying in one subject area. Although gaps in the subject knowledge of multidisciplinary students can sometimes be addressed through providing additional material, the challenges around understanding discourse are often more problematical. One aspect of this is the use of specific language within a particular subject. Subject areas not only develop new words as a proxy for knowledge and ideas, but they also adopt existing words to take on a specific meaning within the context of the subject. For example, the terms “primary”, “secondary” and “tertiary” have different meanings in chemistry to how they are used in earth sciences. The Open University's virtual learning environment (VLE), developed using Moodle, has a glossary function that allows the language that is used and developed within a particular module to be listed with relevant definitions. Access to such glossaries for OUUK Open degree students provides one solution to tackling the problem of subject-specific language.



Other aspects of subject definitions can be linked to academic tradition, for example, a specific referencing style, rules for incorporating quotations and writing styles. Whilst it is important for all students to complete their degree with an understanding of what is required for the specific subjects they have studied, much of this detail can be introduced in the later stages of their studies. As a result, The Open University uses common means of referencing and other academic traditions across all subject areas at OUUK level 1, so that students understand the need for the process before detailed variations are elaborated on later in their studies.

## **Coping With Diverse Assessment Tasks**

Another challenge facing multidisciplinary OUUK Open degree students is the diverse range of assessment requirements across modules in different subjects. At The Open University these include:

- Tutor-marked assignments during the study of the module.
- Computer-marked assignments during the study of the module, usually using a range of online quiz types (for example, multiple choice, drag-and-drop).
- End-of-module invigilated examinations.
- End-of-module extended assignments.

In each type of assignment, there is a wide breadth of different tasks that the student may be required to undertake. For example, there may be essay-based tasks of various lengths, mathematical manipulation tasks, reflective tasks and problem-solving tasks, to name but a few, and the nature of the task is specifically related to the subject-based learning outcomes of the module. In addition, there are also specific subject-based assessment types which require submission in a non-text format for some modules, such as audio in language modules and video or still images in design modules. As a result, these students may be disadvantaged by being exposed to a range of different assessment activities throughout their qualification, whereas students on subject-specific degrees may have had the opportunity to practice these assessment types in earlier modules. In order to support OUUK Open degree students, all assignments in all modules, irrespective of the level or stage of study, are required to provide clear instructions on what the student is being asked to do and what is expected of them. This is backed up by a clear description of how marks will be distributed and a clear definition of the criteria used. However, the most important means of supporting OUUK Open degree students with assessment is through comprehensive feedback by skilled tutors. This personalized teaching will not only explain any gaps within the students' knowledge and skills, but also provides the student with advice on how they should answer questions in the particular subject and, importantly, how they should change their approach to responding to these assessment types in future.

## **RECOGNITION AND ACCREDITATION**

It is important for the OUUK, and its students, that the OUUK Open degree is informally and formally accepted as being valuable by as many organizations as possible, as well as by its students.

## **Quality Assurance Bodies**

Like other public UK universities, The Open University is subject to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education<sup>7</sup> issued by the Quality Assurance Authority (QAA). Part of the process for adhering to this quality code involves a periodic review of each academic program every six years, by a panel that includes external experts, as well as undertaking an annual internal quality review. This review looks at the management of academic standards, the management of the quality of teaching and learning and the accuracy and integrity of published material relating to the qualification. In this way, the OUUK Open degree – and its personalized program of study – continues to be validated and externally recognized within the UK. The Open University is also accredited in the United States through Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) recognition, which included details of the OUUK Open degree and therefore infers the validation of such multidisciplinary qualifications in the United States as well as the UK.

## **Professional Bodies**

Before, and just after The Open University introduced subject-specific degrees, it was possible to study certain pathways and combinations of modules within an OUUK Open degree which were recognized as providing the academic requirements for membership of certain professional bodies. Such professional-body accreditation recognized that it was the content of the degree, as much as name of the degree that defined its relevance to a professional area. While such accreditation of pathways through the OUUK Open degree have subsequently been replaced by subject-specific degrees, there are some professional bodies who will evaluate an individual student's Open degree profile to see if it does meet their academic requirements for certain categories of membership (for example student or associate member). In addition, further study and professional experience can enable students to achieve higher levels of membership (for example full member or Fellow).

## **Employers**

Not only do open degrees continue to be a popular choice for prospective and current students, but employers are increasingly seeking graduates with wide-ranging skills and experience, rather than specifying subject-based knowledge for particular careers. Although it is recognized that the degree subject is important for some sectors (such as manufacturing and engineering), the development of graduates with future-proof, non-discipline specific skills is becoming increasingly important for graduate recruiters. The CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey (Confederation of British Industry, 2016) highlights that businesses primarily look for graduates with the right attitudes and aptitudes to enable them to be effective in the workplace – above and beyond the degree subject(s) studied. The report goes on to suggest that 35 percent of businesses were not looking for graduates with a specific degree subject and 33 percent were not looking for graduates with relevant work experience.

Therefore, it is clear that tailor-made open degrees are not only attractive to students, but also relevant to changing workplace environments and valued by prospective employers. For example, business studies and languages are listed amongst the subjects which may be particularly relevant for a career in Human Resources, and a combination of politics and IT could open up a range of possibilities in the public sector. However, it isn't only predetermined job opportunities that are an option for open degree graduates.

Self-employment is increasing in the UK, with around 15 percent of all people in work now declaring themselves as self-employed (Office for National Statistics, 2017) and therefore, the tailor-made approach to subject and module choice lends itself particularly well to those wanting to start their own business. For example, one graduate who rejected an offer from a traditional face-to-face institution to study film and television production, opted to study an OUUK Open degree instead, in order to combine his studies and work experience at the same time. As a result, he was able to choose from a wide range of modules to suit his personal and professional needs and aspirations. This included web design – enabling him to fix a problem in-house which resulted in him getting more work from the company. He also studied modules in accounting, marketing and project management as part of his OUUK Open degree and as a result, has been successful in setting up his own film production company and is now able to apply what he has learned through his studies in the day-to-day running of his business.

Research carried out with OUUK Open degree students in 2012/13 showed that the majority of students in the sample were already employed and hoping to use their OUUK Open degree to pursue a career change. Those in employment at the time of enquiry had a wide variety of roles in a variety of sectors, which again reflects the diversity of OUUK Open degree choices and motivations. However, around one-third were looking to (re)enter a career, although it was not specified whether this would be as an employee or self-employed. A green paper published by the UK government in January 2017 (UK Department for Education, 2017a) also highlights the need to assist scale-ups and entrepreneurs, and support future talent for an innovative economy, which can also be enhanced by multidisciplinary study.

## **Compilers of Metrics**

While it is possible to obtain valued recognition by external parties through close and detailed evaluation of the University's processes or student profiles, there are some issues with the use of metrics derived from UK-based graduate surveys which don't fully address longer-term part-time study by mature adults (compared to full-time study by young adults) in relation to employability, and the relevant skills and attributes that a student may have acquired through higher education study. This is particularly an issue with a survey carried out by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DHLE) with regard to Open University students, as many are already in work. This is exacerbated by current trends to increasingly survey and evaluate subject-specific degree students and graduates for use in university league tables and other sector-wide frameworks. With the OUUK Open degree being so unique, it can be misleading to try and compare it with other degrees, including those that are seemingly similar, such as Combined Honours and Liberal Arts degrees.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

There are emerging models of informal or non-formal non-accredited study, or partly recognized study, that help prepare people for formal study and also provide significant enrichment to their formal studies. Most of these opportunities are delivered as open educational resources (OERs) (Lane, 2013; Weller et al, 2017), and The Open University does this through its own OER platform, OpenLearn, or through its Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) platform, FutureLearn ([www.futurelearn.com](http://www.futurelearn.com)). These platforms include free, online, generally unsupported courses, derived as extracts from the majority of taught modules across the OUUK's curriculum, as well as bespoke free courses and interactive media materials.

These free courses have variously been available since 2006 as ‘tasters’ of what is covered by a range of the OU’s taught modules.

These tasters are particularly helpful to OUUK Open degree students, as they provide direct experience of the subject matter (and of online learning) of modules they may wish to study, to supplement the formal description in the online prospectus and to ‘extend’ the scope of their chosen pathway through their OUUK Open degree. Since 2014, these free courses have included non-tutored Badged Open Courses (BOCs) and ‘MOOCs for credit’, which are more directly focused on preparation for formal study. Where the study undertaken can be accredited through specially designed taught modules, these free courses also deliver assessment for credit or recognition of prior learning (Law et al, 2015; Law, 2016). In some cases, these courses have been hosted on the University’s community OER website, OpenLearn Create ([www.open.edu/openlearncreate](http://www.open.edu/openlearncreate)) and developed with partner organizations (such as the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership), which are able to provide some study support to learners to gain the skills and confidence needed to go on to formal, accredited Open University modules. As a result, free, open (often online) courses add another layer of flexibility and personalization for OUUK Open degree students, with the study and completion of these courses detailed on their student record. This provides them with an additional opportunity to demonstrate to employers the benefits of studying across different disciplines.

Although this is an example of The Open University recognizing informal study of its own free courses, the wider OER movement is also innovating in different ways around credit transfer and recognition of prior learning that reflect the ethos of the OUUK Open degree (Atkins et al, 2007). One such example is the OER universitas ([oeru.org](http://oeru.org)), where learners can choose to study a range of courses, including ‘micro-courses’, from a number of different partner organizations and other sources to include in their degree profile (Taylor and Mackintosh, 2011). Although this provides learners with the freedom to transfer credit across institutions, the student is still awarded a degree in a specific subject (or subjects), with limited freedom to choose their own degree pathway.

Following on from this, The Open University is keen to expand its own range of personalized curriculum, based on the strengths and legacy of the OUUK Open degree. One development currently underway is the introduction of a new OUUK level 1 ‘recognition of prior learning’ module, which allows students to use OER study as the basis for a personalized, interdisciplinary module that, on successful completion of the module’s assessment criteria, could contribute 30 credits towards an OUUK Open degree. This would allow students to claim credits against previous online study. These students have already shown a commitment and a familiarity with online learning, to the extent that we would expect them to be more successful in completing their qualification. Although the majority of study hours is made up of time spent studying the OER materials, the module will also provide generic materials on study skills development, employability skills, academic literacy and an understanding of the benefits and differences between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary study.

At the other end of the student journey, The Open University is also now considering extending the idea of an ‘open’ degree to masters level, despite having offered masters level qualifications in specific subjects for a number of years. Over the last 30 years or so, the role of the masters degree has changed from a niche, specialist qualification to a more routine award as students try to add value to job applications in response to the increasing number of people who now have undergraduate degrees. This shift has become reflected in the need of the UK higher education sector to deliver a wider, skills-based masters degree. This not only a result of increased interest from potential students, but also by the fact that masters qualifications are becoming increasingly important to employers, some of whom are looking

## ***Open by Degrees***

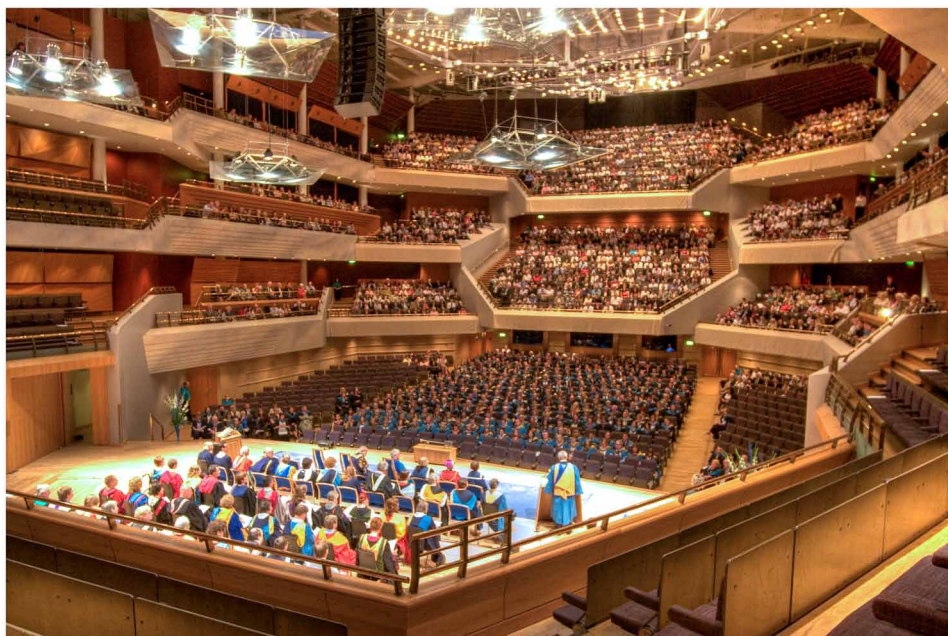
for employees with broad- rather than narrow-focused subject knowledge. It is recognized that an ‘open’ masters degree is not a substitute for specialized training which concentrates on a particular vocation; it is intended for students with broader interests in several fields, or those whose career goals do not match fully with a single identifiable academic area or subject-specific degree. Emphasis would be placed on a constantly changing society, where new career interests can extend across traditional boundaries and specializations. The model would therefore provide an opportunity for students seeking a qualification offering a breadth of skills and knowledge crossing traditional boundaries, and support them accordingly. The qualification would also be particularly relevant to graduates who have previously studied an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary program of study (such as an OUUK Open degree), and adult learners whose subject background may be different to their current planned career pathway.

## **CONCLUSION**

The OUUK Open degree has continuously evolved throughout its history to meet changing circumstances, but it has also had to undergo substantial changes in recent years in response to external pressures that have led to the introduction of subject-specific degrees of varying types alongside it. However, in essence, it still provides the freedom for students to choose their own pathway and to include previous higher education credit (Figure 5).

As a result, the OUUK Open degree remains a vibrant and popular qualification with students. However subject-specific degrees without such flexibility continue to be a standard feature of higher education worldwide, in response to universities addressing the countervailing social and economic

*Figure 5. Open University degree ceremony*  
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needs of both the students and society more generally. Here, debates are mainly about the coverage of the degree within the realm of a specific subject in terms of breadth versus depth and academic versus vocational content. Equally, while there are joint degrees of different types (subject X *and* subject Y, or subject X *with* subject Y), in most cases these are defined by universities rather than by the students themselves, sometimes in response to external standards/expectations, such as the competency frameworks of professional bodies. As described earlier in the chapter, there are some credit transfer schemes that allow universities to recognize credit that students have learned at another university, but, more often than not, that still has to conform to the local expectations of a subject-specific degree. Only in a few cases are such joint degrees currently ‘shared’ by two universities; usually referred to as ‘dual’ or ‘double bachelors’ degrees.

Studying in a multidisciplinary way is therefore far from being an ‘easy option’. In fact, the authors go so far as to argue that all open degree students are ‘brave’ learners; pushing those boundaries of traditional subject-focused education and using their own knowledge and experience to direct their course of study. Self-motivation and determination – as well as excellent tutor and institutional support – are therefore crucial to helping open degree students manage their studies and adapt to new disciplines or levels of study.

To conclude, the authors recommend that other higher education institutions wishing to introduce a multidisciplinary open degree into their portfolio of curriculum consider the following principles, now and into the future:

- The degree has to be recognized to be of value by students, employers and other stakeholders.
- The benefits and richness of studying across subjects should be emphasized, reinforced and celebrated.
- A wide variety of modules have to be made available for students to meet their personal and vocational needs.
- Students should be supported in their choice of modules through appropriate advice either for individual modules or coherent groups of modules.
- Skills need to be developed appropriately and in a coherent fashion across the stages.
- An active community of learners should be encouraged, where students studying more than one subject can engage, support and enrich each other’s studies.
- Resources and guidance should be available to help students transfer their learning between different subjects and disciplines (and/or institutions).
- Graduates have to be supported in articulating the benefits of multidisciplinary study in terms of employability and citizenship.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Badged Open Courses (BOC):** Free, online courses developed in response to the needs of informal learners who are seeking access to study skills and have their learning recognized.

**Interdisciplinary Learning:** A type of learning that allows a student to make connections between ideas and concepts across different disciplinary boundaries.

**Massive Open Online Course (MOOC):** A model for delivering learning content online and providing open access via the internet.

**Multidisciplinary Learning:** A type of learning relating to, or making use of, several disciplines at once in order to enhance the overall scope and depth of learning.

**Open Educational Resources (OERs):** Free and openly licensed educational materials that can be used for teaching, learning, research, and other purposes.

**Open University (UK):** The world's first successful distance teaching university, founded on the belief that communications technology could bring high quality degree-level learning to people who had not had the opportunity to attend traditional campus-based universities.

**OU Levels Framework:** The institutionally agreed set of qualification level descriptors that aligns with external qualification and credit frameworks published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (including frameworks for England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Europe).

**Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA):** An independent, not-for-profit organization that aims to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education wherever it is delivered around the world.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements>
- <sup>2</sup> In the UK, full-time study for a bachelors degree usually takes three years, which corresponds to one year's study at each stage or level.
- <sup>3</sup> More information about UK degree apprenticeships can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-and-degree-apprenticeships>.
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/mission>
- <sup>5</sup> The OU Levels Framework is the institutionally agreed set of qualification-level descriptors that aligns with external qualification and credit frameworks published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (including different frameworks for England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Europe). For example, in England, OU level 1 = FHEQ level 4, OU level 2 = FHEQ level 5, OU level 3 = FHEQ level 6.
- <sup>6</sup> <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy/facts-and-figures>
- <sup>7</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code>